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Serials
QL 671
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THE
MONTHLY



GULL
BULLETIN

VOLUME 15

SAN FRANCISCO, JULY, 1933

NUMBER 7

Ramphastidae

By YNES MEXIA

I have been asked by bird lovers which bird most attracted my attention in my travels in the Tropics, and to such I have had to answer that the different members of the Ramphastidae, the Toucans, are definitely, to me, the most outstanding of the feathered creatures.

The "Toucans," the name adapted from the Indian, are found only in the forests of the New World, and so bizarre and conspicuous are they that as early as 1599 they were known in Europe and named "Ramphastus" by an Italian naturalist, referring to their curved beaks.

In the different genera the size of the birds varies considerably, from that of a bluejay to almost the size of a raven, but in some of the species the enormous bill is actually longer than all the rest of the bird! This huge bill would seem to us to be somewhat of a handicap, but as the bird has multiplied exceedingly there must be some advantage in having it. The other extremity, the tail, is long and rounded, perhaps to balance the beak, and is often perked over the back or flops loosely from side to side. The feet are large and there is apparently so little motion at the heel joint that the bird crouches on a branch or hops awkwardly from limb to limb.

In color the Toucan is surely one of the most striking of birds. The great beak is painted in chrome and black, often variegated by green markings and red splashes, or with bright blue bands, while the bare skin surrounding the eyes is turquoise or lemon yellow or emerald green.

The prevailing tint of the plumage may be black or dark green, but this is set off in the various genera by throats of orange or of white, outlined in crimson or showing lemon underparts slashed across the breast with scarlet. Thighs are bright chestnut, the upper tail coverts crimson or orange, while the feet are pale blue or greenish.

This harlequin bird with his grotesque beak and uncouth ways is surely the clown of the avian world, but no lover of fun is he. Perhaps his outlandish appearance has soured his disposition and made him boorish, morose and solemn. There is no hint of humor, no lightness or playfulness about a Toucan!

Probably the brilliant plumage is not so conspicuous in the tree tops, where, in the bright tropical sunshine, the Toucans pass their lives among the flowers and fruits and insects that make this upper world such a contrast to the shadowy, gloomy understorey of the tropical forest.

The birds make no effort to secrete themselves, but congregate in small flocks in some favorite fruiting tree, squawking and fluttering about while they feed greedily. Supposedly they are fruit eaters, but they indulge freely in insects, lizards, snakes and worst of all, in the eggs and young of smaller birds. The various specimens I brought from the Amazon were shot while attacking a colony of "Paucares", of the family Icteridae, whose beautifully woven, long, pendant nests were ruthlessly torn open and the helpless inmates devoured in spite of the uproar of the distracted colony.

I do not know what, if any, enemies among their own kind the Toucans have, but their large size and striking color patterns make them much sought

after by man. The Indians shoot them with blow-gun and poisoned darts and use their brilliant feathers for adornment in the shape of head circlets and ear pendants.

While staying in Iquitos, in Transandean Peru, awaiting transportation to the Upper Amazon, I was asked one day what I wished for dinner, and in fun, to name something outrageous, I answered "Toucan". Imagine my astonishment when an hour later, there was brought me from the market a live Toucan with his great beak firmly tied together! The mandibles, though light, are very strong; the edge of the upper one is serrated or notched, and they are able to bite severely. I did not know at that time that Toucans were edible, but later when camping above the Pongo de Manseriche, the gorge of the Amazon, we ate them whenever obtainable.

My live Toucan was too interesting to eat, so I put him into a large cage and fed him ripe bananas which he ate by tearing off pieces with the tip of his terrible bill, throwing his head back and thus letting the food fall into his throat. He spent much of his time bouncing from perch to perch and was luckily silent in captivity or we could not have stood him, for the Toucan is the noisiest bird in the jungle, squawking and calling at intervals during the day, especially towards evening. The noise reminds one of nothing so much as the yelping of cur dogs, and these cries and the roaring of the Howling Monkeys are the most characteristic sounds of the Amazon forest.

For a long time nothing was positively known of the eggs or young of the Toucans until they were discovered by William Beebe and described and photographed most interestingly by him in his book, "Tropical Wild Life of British Guiana". The nest is in a cavity high up in a tall forest tree, and the bird lays but two eggs, which are round and whitish. The nestlings, judging from the illustrations, are even more interestingly hideous than the adults.



Trip to Ross, Marin County

The June Field trip was taken Sunday, the 11th, to Ross, Marin County. The day was hot, with a good breeze making the heat bearable in the open places for the sixteen members and two guests present.

The bridge across the creek, the Fire House grounds and the new park across the way were visited first, then the usual course out Lagunitas Road, past Phoenix Lake. From here the party turned to the right as was done two years ago, going up Shaver Grade, the old Bolinas Road through Bon Tempe Meadow to Lake Lagunitas, down Fish Grade Road, again past Phoenix Lake to the fireplace just outside the confines of the Marin Municipal Water District.

Lunch was eaten about 11:30 at this same picnic ground as was supper later. Everyone was warm and tired so an early lunch and rest seemed best. Hot coffee proved a boon at night to the nine who enjoyed it together after a very, very warm day.

Close studies of many species proved delightful, but from the first they were noticeably few in numbers. This morning they were wiser than we were; they had, no doubt, been out early in the cool of the day.

In Ross Common a whole family of Creepers allowed an uninterrupted and close study of them. This proved to be an unusual opportunity to observe their method of feeding, see their curved bills and the uneven lengths of the long, stiff pointed feathers of the tail, which were clearly visible even to the inexperienced observer in spite of their protective coloring. Call notes were numerous also. There were six of them prying and peering along the trunk at one time!

We regretted to note the removal of the "tenement houses" in the Ross School grounds so long occupied by our Woodpecker friends. An ambitious garden plan is no doubt accountable for this. Farther on we thoroughly enjoyed the triple birth of a Robin; one did not suffice, he must needs have three, each thorough and complete. We approved his judgment on such a day.

At the old garden where the two specimen holly trees are so beautiful a lone chickadee took refuge inside the sun porch, peering out at us ever so quaintly until two of the boys helped the owner liberate him for his own good.

The Olive-sided Flycatcher insisted he would "peeve you" this day as we skirted the Smythe property, seldom asking us "what peeved you" as though he might have known it was the heat!

The nest of a Vigor's Wren, some twelve or fifteen feet from the ground on an upright limb with a small wren peering out at us so brightly proved of great interest. Apparently he came out just to show that he could fly, for soon he scarried back to the nest and safety while mother sang vigorously nearby.

No swallows were found to be nesting either under the bridge near Alpine nor in the banks. The beauty of a bluebird perched on a rock, making a charming silhouette, gleaming in the sun was a thrill which compensated us for the nest we did not find in the old nesting post near the upper lake.

In the outer branches of a denuded live oak we found a Hutton Vireo standing erect, mouth open, wings outspread, protecting either eggs or young from the intense heat of the day with her own body. The nest swung from a high branch in true vireo fashion but we were helpless to aid her. How could she have known the oak worm would wreak such havoc with the expected shade?

Five of the party watched for twenty-five minutes, every one of which she spent standing over her treasures, making a veritable parasol of herself. After twenty minutes the mate came to a nearby tree with food in his mouth and called three times. Not receiving an answer he ate the morsel, flew away for more, but returned in five minutes. This time also she did not answer so we moved on, certain that she had been aware of our presence, though her nest was high above us. Later, two of the party, returning this way, saw the actual feeding of the young. Such was the treasure she had been protecting with her wisdom.

We noted with relief that in some places these same live oaks are coming into new leaf again, so perhaps fewer of these tragedies will happen during the remainder of the season.

The young of both Lutescent Warblers and Green-backed Goldfinches were seen by some of the party at the upper picnic grounds, where also was observed the brilliant Lazuli Bunting.

The Ash-throated Flycatcher allowed us a good view of his bushy head and whitish throat as we descended the grade from the lake to the supper grounds in the cool of the evening.

Only four members went the full walk because of the heat which may account for the absence of several species usually recorded on this trip. In all a list of forty-nine species was noted as follows:

Turkey Vulture	Steller Jay	Pileolated Warbler
Red-tailed Hawk	California Jay	English House Sparrow
California Gull	Crow	Meadowlark
Killdeer	Chickadee	Brewer Blackbird
Mourning Dove	Plain Titmouse	Black-headed Grosbeak
Anna Hummingbird	Bush-tit	Lazuli Bunting
Allen Hummingbird	California Creeper	Purple Finch
Kingfisher	Wren-tit	House Finch
Dewey Woodpecker	Bewick Wren	Green-backed Goldfinch
Ash-throated Flycatcher	Robin	Pine Siskin
Olive-sided Flycatcher	Monterey Hermit Thrush	Spotted Towhee
Western Flycatcher	Russet-backed Thrush	Brown Towhee
Purple Martin	Western Bluebird	Lark Sparrow
Cliff Swallow	Warbling Vireo	Junco
Barn Swallow	Hutton Vireo	Chipping Sparrow
Violet-green Swallow	Lutescent Warbler	Song Sparrow
Rough-winged Swallow		

Mrs. Otis H. Smith, Historian.

Audubon Notes

July Meeting: The regular meeting will be held on Thursday, the 13th, at 8 p. m., room 19, Ferry Building.

Mr. John B. Price will show two new films taken of the birds on the Stanford Campus. There will also be observations by members.



July Field Trip will be on Sunday, the 16th, to Land's End, Cliff House and Golden Gate Park. Take Municipal car "C" and ride to end of line, where party will form at 9:30. Bring luncheon.



Membership for the remainder of 1933 is \$1.50. This includes subscription to the monthly bulletin "The Gull", six field trips and six lectures.



Marin County Birds: Will those members having life-lists of birds of Marin County kindly send them to the Editor, together with any unusual observations they may have had in this region. The dates of observations are wanted on all species except the very common ones.



June Meeting: The 190th regular meeting was held on June 8th, in room 19, Ferry Building, with thirty-nine members and guests present. First Vice President Robert Taylor presiding.

The following observations were reported:

Mrs. L. W. Cummings: May 1, Lafayette Square, San Francisco, 6 Tan-

agers, Wood Pewee; Tanagers seen again on the 8th, also Black-headed Grosbeak.

Paul Lehmann: May 21, Niles Canyon, 15 Vaux Swifts, 3 Anthony Green Herons, Cedar Waxwings.

Eddie McClintock: June 1, Santa Clara, Arizona Hooded Oriole.

Commander and Mrs. Parmenter: May 15, San Mateo and Dumbarton Bridges, 125+ Forster Terns, 50+ Caspian Terns; beach near Cliff House, 2 Long-billed and 2 Hudsonian Curlews; Mountain Lake, Presidio, 50+ Bonaparte Gulls; 17th, Metson Lake, Golden Gate Park, Red Phalarope; June 1, San Mateo and Dumbarton Bridges, 200+ Black-bellied Plovers, 60+ Willets, 32 Long-billed Dowitchers, 100+ Marbled Godwits, Northern Phalaropes.

Mrs. Otis H. Smith: May 3, Mill Valley, Olive-sided Flycatchers; 18th, Belvedere, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and on June 8th, at Fairfax, found a pair nesting in a bird house.

Robert Taylor: May 16, Scout Camp, Oakland, Pipit (late date), and added to his back yard list (see April Gull) on June 3, the White-throated Swift and Lawrence Goldfinch.

Miss Edith Allyne read a very delightful paper describing the captivity for several weeks of a young Anna Hummingbird picked up in her garden. Movies were shown of the fascinating little creature in flight and at rest, sipping synthetic nectar from a bottle, and taking a bath in a tablespoonful of water, an excellent picture of an unusual subject, which was thoroughly enjoyed by all present.

Audubon Association of the Pacific

For the Study and the Protection of Birds

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Monthly meeting second Thursday, 8 P. M., Room 19, Ferry Building.

Address Bulletin correspondence to Mrs. A. B. Stephens, Editor, 1695 Filbert St., San Francisco.

Subscription to monthly Bulletin, \$1.00 per year. Single copies, 15c.

Membership dues, payable January 1st, \$3.00 per year.

Student memberships, \$1.50 per year.

Life memberships, \$50.00

Members are responsible for dues until written notice of resignation is received by Treasurer